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THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

POMPEIAN DECORATION.

By R. A. A.



IN Pompeii we do not find the magnificent buildings, evidence of which have been discovered in Rome. The earthquake of A. D. 63 had practically destroyed the city, but the Senate ordered it to be rebuilt, and its houses were erected and decorated with the utmost dispatch. The partial destruction and preservation of Pompeii occurred in A. D. 79, by the eruption of Vesuvius, owing to which the beautiful decorations of the buildings have been preserved to us, and every day bring fresh discoveries to light. The Romans must have delighted in decoration, for the decorations at Pompeii are wonderfully elaborate, and executed with great skill. It is surprising that the Pompeian style of decoration has not received more attention from decorators, as the schemes and motives employed suggest a basis on which may be founded a style that lends itself readily to modern requirements in decoration. The Pompeian style is intensely decorative, and is a branch of that great European style of art which began in Greece, and passing through Italy,

France, Spain and England, has found its way also the United States. The most beautiful effects are gained, not by the number of colors employed, nor by the curious tones of colors used nowadays, such as sickly and bilious yellows and greens, mawkish pinks and dirty browns, but a simple range of pure colors were employed in the decorations, a red which resembles Indian red, or warm vermilion; yellow which may be either yellow ochre or chrome yellow, and green or terra verte. Purples, madders and blues were also used, the blue being either indigo or light cobalt, but these colors were but rarely met with. It is thought that most of the houses were decorated by a comparatively small number of masters with their staffs of workmen. They had their pattern-books, and their motives literally at their fingers' ends, so that with a charming abandon, and with an incredibly certain and facile hand, they painted their vistas of airy fantastical forms, architecturally disposed, and decked with wreaths and garlands over the naked walls. In their decoration we see traces of that combined art and beauty which permeated Greek life; in fact, the decorations are but a transcript of Hellenic art,

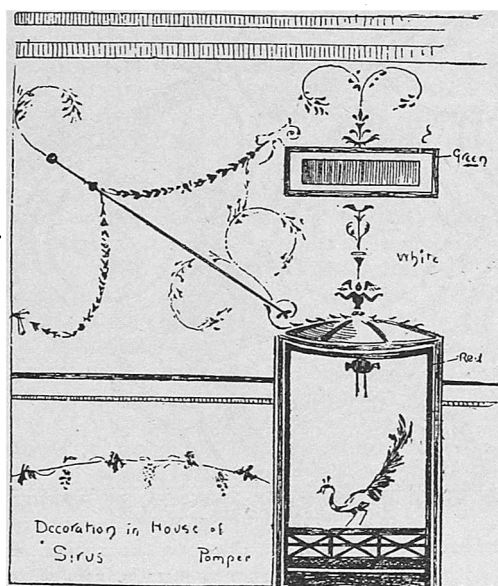


FIG. 1.

somewhat modernized and very largely domesticated. It appears that the Pompeians executed their wall decorations in fresco, that is upon a newly prepared and moistened plaster surface, although sometimes their work was executed upon a dry ground. There is no doubt but that their plaster, even for ordinary use, must have been of an extremely good quality, and in many cases is still of a cream color with a somewhat shiny appearance. It was a favorite practice of the decorators to leave the plastered walls in their natural shade, and to paint their arab-

esques, etc., in color on this ground. In no case do we find a coat of white or cream paint when the ground is intended to be left that color. The plaster used nowadays would not allow of a treatment so simple as this, owing to its inferiority. In other cases large surfaces were colored with two coats of color, the first being a thick, and the second a thin coat; thus allowing the first to show through the second, and giving a somewhat mottled appearance when looked at closely, but a most pleasing effect when viewed from a distance. By this means the ancient decorators avoided that feeling of hardness which is so noticeable in our solid modern work. This is a point worthy of consideration. Another point to be remarked is, that where two bands of different colors, generally of a bright hue, are placed together, a thin line of the natural ground color is left. In no case has any gilding been discovered in Pompeii, but a bright rich yellow appears to have taken its place in a very effective manner. Even large surfaces were painted in this color, and that without producing a glaring effect. It was also a favorite tint for the bases of columns, and both for internal and external work. Indian red and green were used generally for bands for the

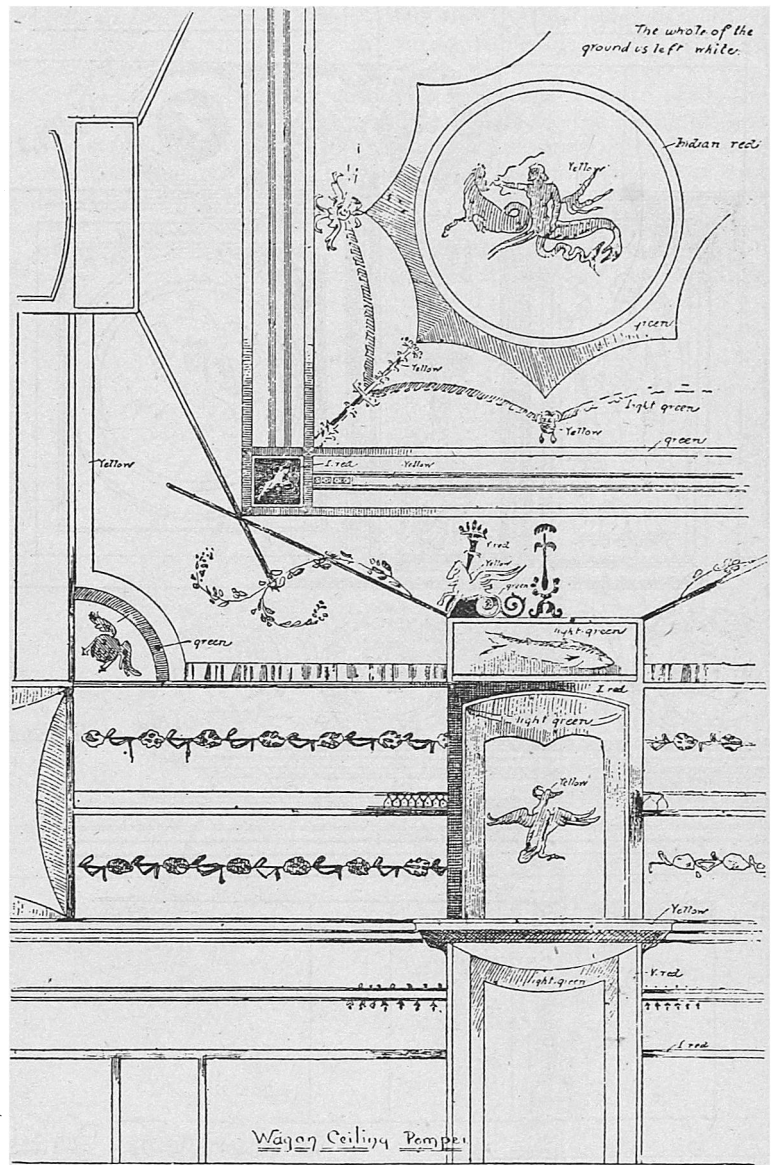


FIG. 2.

picking out of cornices. Blue is not often found, but when used, is seen generally in friezes and ceilings to correspond with the idea of a sky. Black was employed largely, and was much used for the grounds to show up the bright, light-colored arabesques and panel pictures. Madders and purples were used only for small spaces, a most effective example being found in the frieze, Fig. 1.

Symmetry in the setting out of the decorations of the rooms was considered important, and a curious instance is in one room in Pompeii in which one side was divided into three divisions or panels, and, there being a door in the centre of one of the side divisions, a false four-panelled, with architraves, etc. (very similar to what might be seen in any ordinary modern house), was painted in the centre of the division on the other side to range with the actual door.

The schemes of decorations for the walls of the interior consisted generally of the friezes, the filling or wall space, and the

dado, and this appears to have been the motif generally adhered to. A very common idea seems to have been that the room should appear to be, so to speak, open to the sky—that the wall should seem to be simply a framework. To make this illusion complete, there were the light columns (uncommonly like the light iron columns we see used nowadays) supporting a light open framed roof; the dado, a balustrade, with flowers and shrubs showing behind; the frieze, a series of garlands and festoons; and the ceiling, a simple light roof, which appeared to be formed of lathes, with branches of shrubs and trees intertwined. We give an illustration of a ceiling of this kind in Fig. 2.

Another arrangement was that the walls should be divided into panels, generally of red, yellow or black, with columns painted between, panel pictures being painted on the walls, suspended by garlands of flowers. Here and there lovely maidens are seen dancing in mid-air; Eros tinkles on the strings of a lyre

Mosaic floors. The columns and walls were invariably constructed of bricks, which were covered with stucco and decorated by picking out the mouldings, etc., in color. The bases of the

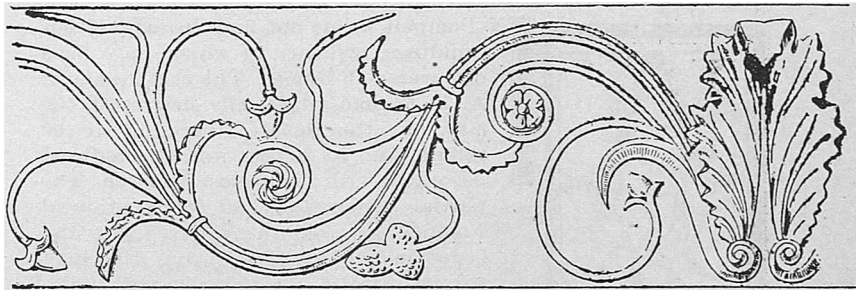


FIG. 4.

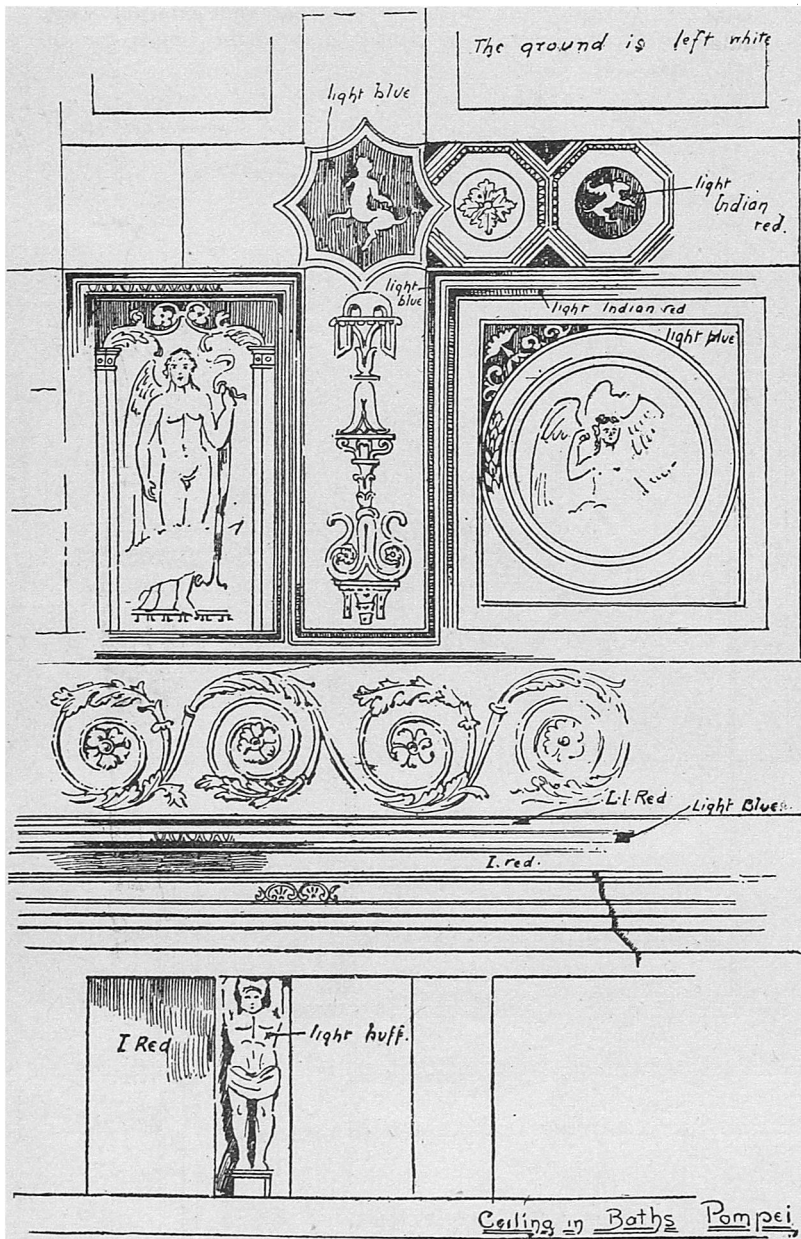


FIG. 3.

held by Pysche; satyrs and nymphs, centaurs and bacchantes, people the airy realm of fancy.

Another treatment—but this is uncommon—is to have the “framing,” as it might be called, composed of columns, pediments, balustrades, etc., in bas-relief, the panels being filled in with figure subjects, sometimes also in bas-relief, but more often painted.

The illustration, Fig. 3, is one of the side walls and ceiling to the tepidarium of the *Thermae*, an apartment 32 ft. by 17 ft. A frieze running round it is furnished with niches for depositing clothes and toilet articles, and is supported by figures of Atlas, in terra cotta. The grounds of the panels are colored light blue and light Indian red. Fig. 4 is a frieze in marble, from a tomb in the Strada dei Sepolii.

In considering the exterior decorations of the houses, it will be noted that marble is rarely met with in the public and domestic architecture of Pompeii, except in the *Piscinae* and

columns, which to the peristylia of the houses were in all cases of the Doric order, were colored either bright Venetian red or yellow; the caps were picked out with red (vermillion) and green.

Fig. 5 is an illustration of a ceiling of the *Thermae* of Stabia. It will be seen that the ceiling is covered with medallions and interwoven borders in a bold and effective manner. In fact, the Pompeian artists were all decorators, men who possessed the courage of their convictions, and divided up the surfaces of walls and ceilings with the boldest kind of panelling, the individual panels having apparently no relation to each other either in size or style of treatment. The spaces between these were usually filled up with borders of hexagonal panels, the effect of the entire decoration being to transform barren spaces into surfaces that pleasantly interested the eye with a veritable feast of forms and colors. Both mind and eye were continually fed with a carnival of frescoed delights, analogous to the more substantial banquets indulged in by the Romans, in which rare viands and troupes of singers, dancers and athletes were the conspicuous factors. To balance the gaiety of the *Triclinum* or *Oecus*, the walls must need to be decorated by the same joyous, bounding life, whether it be the life of nature, or of geometry.

These mural decorations were a feast for the eyes, and are so still. The Pompeians were not simply content with the diapers and borders, but introduced flowers, fruit and landscapes, figures and groups, and in many cases historical or religious subjects, that covered the whole piece of wall, wherein the fancy of the decorator rose to the height of epic art. The Pompeians especially excelled in fancy pictures, swarm of little genii fluttered down the walls of their houses, wore crowns or garlands, angled with the rod and line, chased birds, raced in chariots, or danced

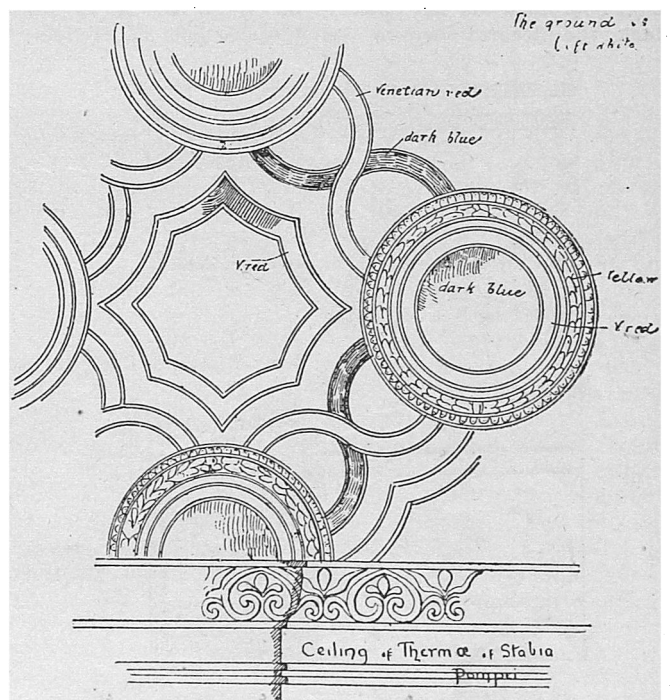


FIG. 5.

on the tight-rope, holding up thyrses for balancing-poles, but more beautiful than these fancied rope-dancers were the female dancers, perfect prodigies of self-possession and buoyancy, rising of themselves from the ground, and sustained without an effort in the voluptuous air that cradled them. One in dancing uncovered her neck and shoulders; another holds aloft a branch of cedar and a golden sceptre, while another clashes cymbals or

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drums, the tambourine. Some of the nymphs are almost nude, and some drape themselves in tissues as transparent as though woven of air; some again wrap themselves in mantles in the act of falling off their figures; sometimes two nymphs hold each other by the hand as they float upwards. The different dances, attitudes, movements, undulations and characteristics of the nymph, are produced in every possible phase of voluptuous luxuriance. Then again, all the romance of mythology is limned upon the walls, the ancient divinities are grouped in well-known scenes. We see the education of Bacchus, the story of Ariadne, and the loves of Jupiter, Apollo, Daphne, Mars and Venus; Adonis dying. There were also the heroes of renown—Theseus and Andromeda; Meleager; Jason and Hercules; Achilles and Agamemnon. Nothing is distorted; nothing attitudinizes. Ariadne is really asleep, and Hercules, in wine, really sinks to the ground; the dancing girl floats in the air as though in her native element; the centaur gallops without an effort; all is simple reality; it is nature such as she actually is when she is pleasant to behold in the full effusion of her grace. The work of these second-rate painters of walls possesses the instinct of art, spon-

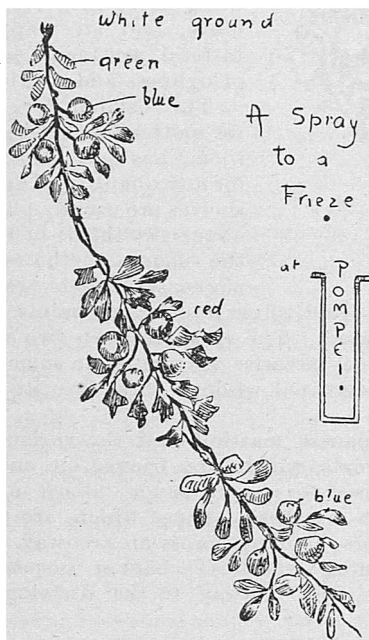


FIG. 6.

taneousness, freedom of touch, and vivid life. The ancients understood the right treatment of nude subjects, in which there is no suggestion of nakedness, the figures being so delightfully natural. An eminent critic has observed that modern statues are not nude but simply undressed.

These paintings will be eternally studied: they give us precious data not only on art but concerning everything that relates to antiquity—its manners and customs, its ceremonies, its costumes, the homes of those days, the elements and natures as they then appeared. Pompeii is not a gallery of pictures; it is rather an illustrated journal of the first century.

While such a system of coloring as that adopted by the Pompeians is highly suitable for interior decoration, it is also equally applicable to the exterior of buildings. The reason why Americans are willing to live in factory-like rows of brownstone dwellings is, that the taste of the people in matters of decoration is wholly uncultivated. The prevalence of the boarding-house system is also largely responsible for the wide-spread toleration of barbarous, or a total want of, decoration in the vast majority of dwellings in American cities. What is everybody's business is nobody's business, and the shrewd house owner would as soon think of committing suicide as having his property deliberately decorated for the benefit of his tenants. If house owners were willing to at least decorate the outside of their houses, what a splendid result would gladden the eye of the wayfarer in this city of living tombs, known as New York. Our climate and atmosphere are quite as bright and clear as that of Pompeii. It certainly would be a vast improvement if the whole front of a brownstone house were decorated with bright colors, and where pillars exist, having the bases, caps and mouldings picked out in strong contrasts. Let the whole house be painted, say a cream color, the bases of the columns in the doorway, say for three feet high, be colored a Venetian red, the caps and lower bases being picked out in red and yellow, the iron balcony might be painted red, the window frames and doors dark green. The architraves, cornices, etc., of the windows might be picked out in red, yellow and green.

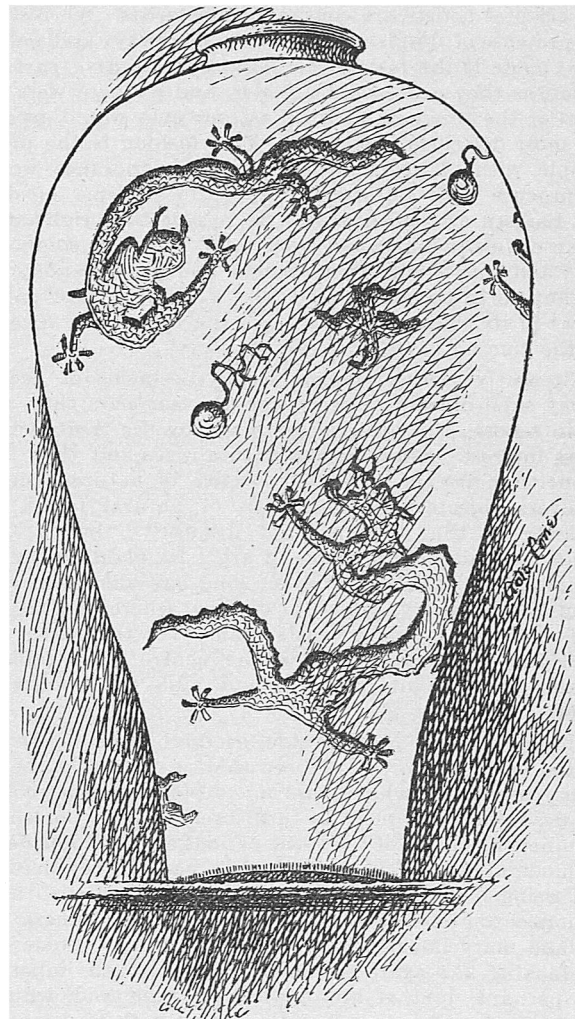
Great variety could be obtained, for no two houses in a street need be painted alike, and all this could be done at a very slightly increased expense on the ordinary cost of painting a house. Pompeian decoration is very well adapted for the treatment of store fronts which always seem so unsatisfactory.

DECORATIVE QUALITY IN ORIENTAL PORCELAIN.

By ADA CONE.

TO the professional decorator, in the course of his agreeable labors—happily described by some one as “varying pleasantly the monotony of blank spaces”—it is not always permitted to choose the purely decorative pieces of furniture, the *petits meubles*. For either the house-owner's limited means or undeveloped taste leads him to do without objects which have no use but to please the eye, or else he may reserve them to exercise his own individual judgment upon—a paradoxical reserve—a curiously infelicitous one for persons without trained taste, seeing that, unlike the judgment, which may serve for selecting useful furniture, choice here turns to æsthetic merits alone.

And it is well for the decorator that he is able to shift the responsibility for a considerable amount of the æsthetic sins perpetrated in the name of ornamental furniture. For this class of objects seems to be oftenest provided on the assumption that the sole satisfaction which the eye takes in an ornament rises from finding something, no matter what, in the conventional places where inutile objects are accustomed to be found; so the places sacred to beauty are filled with bric-a-brac, the candida-



CHINESE PORCELAIN VASE, BLUE GROUND WITH WHITE DECORATION, FROM THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK CITY.

ture of junk shops, and the eye is complacently invited to contemplate vulgarity, and repose itself upon the monstrous, until like the red hot basins with which the brigands used to blind their enemies, the sight of these vicious objects is slowly but surely destroying our latent powers to understand the beautiful.

This is the result of general ignorance in matters of taste. But there is another, a specious cause of misjudgment in selecting ornamental furniture into which the decorator himself may easily fall. It is that of choosing by the standard of the con-